



Cutting Maricopa's commute

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Cars start their northward trek before the sun rises every weekday. By morning rush hour, a steady line of vehicles streams along Maricopa Road toward Ahwatukee, Chandler and Valley cities with scant braking room between them.

The flood of traffic from Maricopa is surprising considering it comes from a relatively new city that for decades was a rural farming community.

"What we see is most of them (residents) going into the greater Phoenix metro area," said Danielle Casey, a management assistant for the city who has lived in Maricopa since July 2004. It takes Casey's husband 40 minutes to drive to his job in south Phoenix, a commute comparable to those from closer-in East Valley cities.

Maricopa surveyed its residents and found many work for Intel Corp., which operates two computer-chip factories in Chandler.

"While transportation is a challenge for everyone in Arizona, it's Number 3 on the City Council (priority) list behind public safety and economic development," Casey said.

And boosting its employer base could ease the city's transportation troubles, Maricopa Mayor Kelly Anderson said.

Maricopa, incorporated in October 2003, estimates its population at 32,000 residents based on water hookups and new residential home-building permits. That's double the 16,934 residents the U.S. Census counted just two years ago in 2005.

By late 2010, the city estimates it will have 78,934 residents - almost as many as Ahwatukee Foothills.

Anderson said the Maricopa City Council hasn't adopted a resolution about the proposed South Mountain Loop 202 being studied for Pecos Road in Ahwatukee.

"I think it's going to be a route of importance. Where it lands is out of our hands, whether it's on the Ahwatukee side or the Gila River (Indian Community) side. It bodes well for people of the Gila to think of transportation in an economic-development sense."

This past November, the tribal council agreed to establish a transportation team to begin "exploratory

negotiations" with the Arizona Department of Transportation and federal officials over various roadways, including the South Mountain Freeway and widening Interstate 10.

Some residents see the freeway as a solution for commuters who want to avoid the Broadway Curve bottleneck on Interstate 10 by going west to 55th Avenue.

That route would cut into the western edge of South Mountain, which the tribe considers sacred and others say should be preserved.

Maricopa residents say they just want another way to get to and from work.

Many currently use Beltline Road, a 12-mile asphalt road that swings south around South Mountain, cutting through the Gila River Indian Reservation and providing a bypass for commercial trucks and cars heading northwest from the southeast Valley and Tucson, and vice versa.

Nearly 9,000 vehicles on average rumbled over the road each day as of October, spokesman Roger Ball said. That's up from an average of 7,800 a year earlier.

Anderson said Maricopa city officials hope the city's proximity (about 20 minutes away from Pecos Road) will turn out to be a draw for residents of Ahwatukee and other East Valley cities once Maricopa's business base is built.

"We could be a reverse commute for Ahwatukee," he said.